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PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #1083/01 2011516
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 201516Z JUL 07
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8814
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1336
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001083

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/2017

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SUBJECT: AOUN SURVEYS POLITICAL LANDSCAPE, HIS ROLE AFTER
PARIS TALKS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
) .

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a July 19 meeting with the Ambassador, Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun was mildly positive about the recent Paris talks, noting that his "team" had played a constructive role. He expressed his willingness to be a facilitator in any future efforts to solve Lebanon's political crisis, including meeting with March 14 leader Saad al-Hariri. Aoun was open to U.S. help in arranging such a meeting.

¶2. (C) In response to concerns that Hizballah was effectively undermining the Taif Agreement and UNSCR 1701, Aoun merely reiterated he was encouraging Hizballah to implement 1701 fully, and that he and the FPM are in no way obligated to accept Hizballah's position. Aoun personally does not believe that Hizballah SYG Nasrallah is controlled by Syria and/or Iran, and seemed unconcerned by the suggestion that Hizballah might be using him.

¶3. (C) While Aoun has not budged from his implacable opposition to the Siniora government, he was vague when pressed to specify which of its policies were harming Lebanon. Aoun stressed more than once that a national unity government was the sine qua non for reaching solutions and he continues to be adamant about his right to the presidency, asserting that he would easily win. As for the upcoming by-elections, Aoun said if the Supreme Court does not stop them, the FPM would participate with Camille Khouury as its candidate. End summary.

TOO EARLY TO JUDGE USEFULNESS OF PARIS

¶4. (C) In a July 19 meeting with the Ambassador at his residence in Rabieh, Aoun, accompanied by his advisor and son-in-law Gebran Bassil, said his envoys to the talks, MP Ibrahim Kanaan and Simon Abi Ramia, had played a constructive role in bringing the sides closer. Now we had to wait and see what the "attitude of the first-class leaders" would be. He said he did not know what the French planned to do next.

DOWNPLAYS HIZBALLAH'S UNDERMINING OF UNSCR 1701, NATIONAL
UNITY

¶5. (C) In response to the Ambassador's concern that

Hizballah continues to flaunt UNSCR 1701's ban on arms smuggling, thus exposing Lebanon to a repeat of the 2006 war, Aoun merely said that the FPM, which was not obliged to accept Hizballah's position on any issue, was encouraging Hizballah to fully implement UNSCR 1701. Aoun also seemed unaware that Hizballah may be undermining the Taif Agreement, and seeking an eventual sectarian partitioning of Lebanon. Aoun made the astonishing assertion that he did not think Hizballah was under Syrian and/or Iranian control, and characterized Hizballah SYG Nasrallah as an "independent thinker" in what concerns Lebanon. He seemed unconcerned by the possibility that Hizballah may be playing games with him, as the Ambassador suggested.

VAGUE ON REJECTION OF SINIORA; STEADFAST ON PRESIDENCY

¶6. (C) Aoun would not admit that his rejection of PM Siniora and the current government was at least in part, a way to curry favor with opposition forces. Yet, he was hard-pressed to come up with specific examples of Siniora policies he believed were harming Lebanon. Advisor Bassil intervened, mentioning recruitment for public jobs. The Ambassador countered that the Siniora government's action at Nahr al-Bared was the first time the Sunni political class was taking tough action against Sunni extremists (a reference to Fatah al-Islam). Aoun finally offered that corruption was becoming worse, without giving more detail. He repeated that only a national unity government could ensure against sectarian clashes and a political vacuum.

¶7. (C) Furthermore, Aoun believes the problem of the presidency (and apparently all others) can be solved by electing him and, almost childishly, asked "Why don't they want me as president?" He is confident he would win the

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majority of Christian votes and a good part of the Sunni vote. As for the general consensus on the necessity of a two-thirds quorum in parliament in order to elect a new president, Aoun would only say the his bloc expects to engage, "but it depends on the situation then." As for the by-elections scheduled for August 5, Aoun was still hopeful that the Supreme Court would stop the elections, but said the FPM would participate if it did not. He acknowledged that it would be tough for FPM candidate Camille Khoury if Amine Gemayel ran for the vacant seat, which his late son Pierre Gemayel used to occupy before he was assassinated.

OPEN TO U.S. FACILITATION OF A MEETING WITH HARIRI

¶8. (C) Aoun noted that Saad al-Hariri had not followed up on his initial phone call, in which he expressed his desire to meet in order to iron out differences (Hariri has been out of country for some time). Aoun said he was willing to engage with Hariri if it could facilitate a solution, adding that Hariri had mentioned some family issues he had to resolve before returning to Lebanon. Aoun reacted positively to the Ambassador's offer to facilitate a meeting with Saad al-Hariri by arranging a preparatory meeting between an Aoun and a Hariri representative. He noted that his advisor Bassil often engaged with PM Siniora's advisor Mohamed Chatah, who is also close to Hariri.

FELTMAN